



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Norman Rutherford, Mystery Man of Waquoit

Before it housed the Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, this grand mansion was called the Sargent estate, and its most tantalizing resident, Norman Rutherford, set tongues wagging when he arrived around 1920. Where did he come from? How did he make a living? His neighbors didn't know, but they could see he was a "bon vivant" who cruised around town in a fancy limousine and entertained exotic guests. He was friendly



Norman Rutherford occupied the Sargent estate during the Roaring Twenties. Contrary to rumor, he was not murdered there.

with an Italian count, and friendlier still with the Count's wife—or so people said. One day in 1929, Norman Rutherford disappeared without a trace. Had he been murdered? Seventy years later, people were still linking him to bone fragments found in the bay, and to eerie noises heard in the mansion during its lonely hours.

The real story begins far from Falmouth, in Bathurst, New South Wales, where Norman Franklin Rutherford was born in 1870. At age 20 he graduated from the University of Melbourne. Two years later, still living in Australia, he was awarded a U.S. patent for an arc lamp. The steamship *Scythia* carried him from Liverpool to Boston in August 1894. Lodging in Somerville, he studied at MIT, where he joined the Electrical Engineering Society and wrote his thesis on "Some Effects of Inductance and Capacity in Alternating Current Circuits." After graduation, Norman married Isabel (Duke) Hardy in Boston on September 15, 1897. It was the second marriage for Irish-born Isabel, who was three years older than her bridegroom.

The couple next surfaces in a 1912 passenger list for the SS *Excelsior*, bound from Havana to New Orleans. This manifest lists Norman as an alien, and indicates that he and Isabel had spent the last seven years in Mexico. Their current address was given as 18 Calle Victoria, Saltillo—a city called the Athens of Mexico, known for its population

of intellectuals and expatriates. Was Norman using his skills to improve the Mexican infrastructure? We can't really be sure. In March 1913, Norman, called a "mechanical engineer" and resident of Mexico, crossed the border into Brownsville, Texas. With a revolution now raging in Mexico, he would soon leave that country for good.

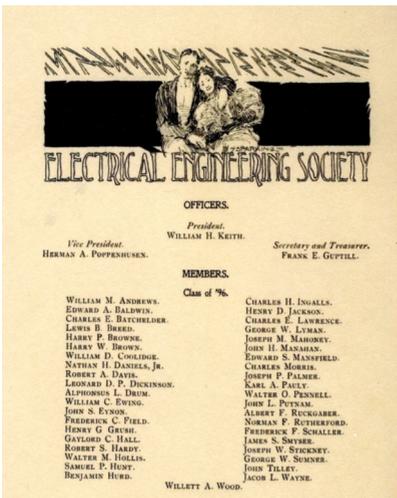
In 1916, and again in 1919, when he applied for patents on an electrical system and a "suspension apparatus," Norman Rutherford declared himself to be a subject of the king of Great Britain, and a resident of East Falmouth, Massachusetts. In the 1920 census, he and Isabel were living at the Sargent estate, and Norman had a new occupation: cranberry growing. Between 1918 and 1921, he bought and mortgaged numerous pieces of land from surrounding neighbors, perhaps to expand the area available for his crop. During this time the legend of the "mystery man" was born. The parties, the limousine, the reticence about his background—all recalled the hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925. At least one incident, however, should have hinted that Norman had more in common with "the absent-minded professor" than with the debonair Jay Gatsby. Local lore has it that while serving as treasurer of the Waquoit Bay Yacht Club, Norman once forgot to insert the plug in his boat before launching it from the Boat House. It promptly began to sink, to the surprise of several onlookers—and himself.

Ultimately, living life in the fast lane as a cranberry grower didn't work out for Norman. In 1929 the Sargent property was taken back by the bank president, George E.

Dean, for \$5,000. Without saying any good-byes, Norman quietly slipped out of town, never to show his face here again. By 1935, he was living in Islip, New York. In the 1940 census, he was still there, still an alien, and now a widower. In 1941, aged 71, he received a patent for a toy called "Jacob's Ladder." Made with double acting hinges, it was "capable of many and astonishing movements."

A genealogist on Ancestry.com posted a claim that Norman died on September 26, 1950, somewhere in the U.S. We haven't confirmed this, but feel confident that at least we've debunked the notion that he was murdered and fed to the eels in Waquoit Bay.

In this internet age, it's very hard for anyone to disappear without a trace. This holds true even for people, like Norman, who lived long



The MIT yearbook for 1897 lists Norman as a member of the Electrical Engineering Society. Note the logo, with its somewhat racy depiction of a "sparkling" couple.

before the Internet was dreamed of. Their secrets, once safely buried in the dusty archives of governments, corporations, and universities, are now exposed to the view of determined researchers, whenever those records are published online. What would Norman have thought of all this? He cherished his privacy, but he was also fascinated by technology, and wanted to play a part in its advance. Thanks to the technology of the internet, we have a clearer picture of this fun-loving inventor, who traveled far and wide, and who didn't mind being an outsider wherever he went.

*Thelma A. Spicer
& Meg Castello*



Learn More

To learn more about Waquoit, or about Falmouth in the 1920s, visit the Conant House Research Library at 65 Palmer Ave., open Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-2.

For a tour of the museums, including a “Timeline of Falmouth History,” come to the Hallett Barn at 55 Palmer Ave., Tuesday - Friday, 11-4. Saturdays, 11-2.



Next week's *Untold Tale*

You've seen his work a hundred times if you've spent much time in Falmouth—but you probably couldn't recognize his name. Who was Karl Oberteuffer, and what inspired him to leave his mark on our town?